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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KABUL 000396

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TAGS: PGOV AF

SUBJECT: OPPOSITION LEADERS SAY THEY SUPPORT UNITY ON PRESIDENTIAL CONTINUITY QUESTION

REF: A. KABUL 371
¶B. KABUL 372

Classified By: CDA Christopher Dell for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. First Vice President Massoud and United Front leader Burhanuddin Rabbani back a unified effort to resolve the issue of President Karzai's status following the 5/22 constitutional expiration date of his term. In separate and recent conversations with the Ambassador, each: (1) supported the 8/20 presidential election date; and (2) pledged to find a solution in the country's best interests, despite their position that Karzai should step down after 5/22 in favor of a caretaker government. The Ambassador warned both that any Afghan leader who resisted a sensible solution to the problem would bear a heavy burden of responsibility, which could be reflected in the August poll and in future relations with the U.S. government. Rabbani issued the United Front's position on the issue a few hours after his meeting with the Ambassador. His toned-down rhetoric suggests opposition leaders understand and accept the U.S. warning. End Summary.

Rabbani: "Historic Times Call For Historic Decisions"

¶2. (C) The Ambassador called on Prof. Rabbani on 2/21 to communicate U.S. views on the 8/20 election date and the issue of executive authority after 5/22. The Ambassador declared that the United States' sole interest was to preserve the stability, security, and constitutional government of Afghanistan. Administrative and security arrangements would not be in place until August, which would mean any election sooner would result in fewer Afghans being able to vote. The U.S. had no preference for any candidate and believed the election was for Afghans to decide.

¶3. (C) On the issue of executive authority, the Ambassador told Rabbani the U.S. would expect major Afghan political leaders to reach a solution on the post-5/22 executive authority issue in time to avoid the potential for central government instability during the peak summer fighting season. The U.S. had no position on any of the numerous proposed solutions, but insisted the Palace and the opposition take the issue seriously and act soon in the country's best interests to find a solution. The authority of the executive, including Cabinet ministers, could not be put in doubt at the peak of Taliban activity. Leaders who resisted a sensible solution and jeopardized the country's stability could face recriminations from Afghan voters and in their future relations with the U.S.

¶4. (C) Rabbani supported the 8/20 election date, but preferred Karzai step down after 5/22 if he wished to run for re-election. The United Front believed Karzai would manipulate government resources to his advantage if he were allowed to head the government and run for office at the same time. UF leaders have met other political factions to seek a consensus on options for the government after 5/22. Most leaders support a caretaker government of some kind, but

there was no agreement on who should lead the country during the interim period. Rabbani promised to respect Karzai's authority "until his term ends" and negotiate with the country's best interests in mind. "Historic times call for historic decisions," he said. "We are aware we should take wise steps and think before acting."

Massoud: "Everyone Agrees on August 20 Date"

¶5. (C) First Vice President Massoud told the Ambassador in a separate 2/21 meeting that, despite his recent criticisms of Karzai (ref A), he would work for "the benefit of the country" to find an acceptable solution to the post-5/22 question. Massoud agreed 8/20 was the best time for an election and appreciated U.S. and international commitments to provide security for a free and open election. Massoud also preferred Karzai step down in favor of an interim government, but said he would remain a constructive participant in talks on the future of the government. "We will not think of personal benefits," he told the Ambassador, "We will think only of national interests."

United Front Tones Down Language

¶6. (C) A few hours after seeing the Ambassador, Rabbani clarified the United Front position on Karzai's post-5/22 status, at a public ceremony commemorating the anniversary of a Kabul uprising against Soviet forces. Rabbani repeated the UF position that Karzai should resign after his term ended on 5/22, but left room for a negotiated settlement. UF member

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Sediq Chakari had told us last week Rabbani and Massoud would deliver harsh remarks on Karzai's leadership at this ceremony, even calling into question the legitimacy of the government. It is possible the opposition heard our warnings about unconstructive behavior, and thus toned down its public statement. We will continue to deliver our message to other members of the political establishment and encourage the international community to do the same (ref B).

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